

AUDIO

SONY Walkman NWZ-A815

★★★★

£75 inc VAT

From www.amazon.co.uk

This latest version of Sony's video Walkman is the first not to force you to use Sony's awkward SonicStage software to transfer media to it. Nor does it insist on converting your music to ATRAC format before copying it. You can now use Microsoft's Media Transfer Protocol (MTP), so you can simply drag and drop files using Windows Explorer, synchronise with Windows Media Player, or use any program that supports the standard. Although the new Walkman can't play ATRAC files, you'll be able to listen to WMA and non-DRM AAC formats as well as Wav and MP3.

Sound quality was generally good, but treble could have been clearer and bass at default settings wasn't as deep or powerful as we would like. As a result, some tracks sounded flat, but we could correct this using the player's EQ settings. Other audio enhancement modes attempt, with varying degrees of success, to improve the quality of low-bit rate audio files, normalise the volume across your music collection and recreate various acoustic environments. The bundled ear-canal headphones aren't up to Sony's high standard, with surprisingly poor bass.

The NWZ-A815's rectangular shape isn't entirely comfortable to hold or use one-handed. Its design, button layout and interface are largely unchanged from previous models. The menu system is fairly simple to use, although the icon grid of the home menu screen is



cluttered. You can browse tracks in various ways, including by the initial of a song, artist or album. Quick browsing features (such as by initial) aren't particularly necessary on a 2GB player, as you can't fit that many tracks on it, but could prove useful on high-capacity versions. The player's battery life was great

at 21 hours and nine minutes for audio and just over four-and-a-half hours for video playback.

The Walkman can play MPEG4 videos created using the MPEG4 or H.264 codec at a maximum resolution of 320x240. Most videos created for the iPod will play happily. No conversion software is supplied, but plenty of freeware programs do the job. The 2in screen is bright and colours were fine. Additional brightness controls let you brighten dark images. You can watch videos vertically or horizontally, though the latter gives the greatest amount of available screen size.

The NWZ-A815 has only a 2GB capacity; the 4GB NWZ-A816 and 8GB NWZ-A818 cost £86 and £120 respectively. Sadly, while the NWZ-A815 is a decent MP3 player, it fails to stand out from the crowd. If you're picky about audio and video quality, you're better off with Samsung's YP-T9, while the new iPod Nano has better video quality.

Kat Orphanides

SUMMARY

☒ Easy to transfer music

☒ Good battery life

☒ No DRM support

FLASH MEMORY MP3 PLAYER 2GB capacity, supports MP3, Wav and unprotected AAC and WMA formats, 2in 320x240 LCD, USB Hi-Speed interface
PART CODE NWZA815
DETAILS www.sony.co.uk

FAQ

Q Will the songs I bought from Sony Connect in ATRAC format still work when Sony suspends the service?

A Although new Sony players can't play ATRAC files, Sony has said that the Connect Music Service will remain open until at least March 2008. Unfortunately, all files bought from the service use Digital Rights Management (DRM). This means the only way to convert the files to another format is to burn them to an audio CD and rip them from that disc into another format, such as MP3.

After Sony Connect is suspended, you'll still be able to listen to your ATRAC DRM files using the SonicStage software, and transfer them to older Sony players that support it. However, it's unlikely that any new audio players will support the format.

Kat Orphanides

Printers and audio expert

kat@computershopper.co.uk



Also consider...

SANDISK Sansa e280

★★★★★

£66 inc VAT

From www.bluebat.com


This classy 8GB MP3 player is great value. It has an impressive battery life of 18 hours and 17 minutes. Its raised control wheel and menu system are easy to use and the

1.8in colour screen was free from graininess. Audio quality was consistently good, and the player is capable of higher volumes than most. Its sound was clear and undistorted, even when we bass-boosted the loudest settings. We were impressed by the speed and stability of the video-conversion software that accompanies the e280. An added bonus is that its storage capacity can be expanded via a microSD slot.

MP3 PLAYER 8GB capacity, supports MP3, WMA, WMA-DRM, JPEG and BMP images, MOV video (with limitations), USB Hi-Speed interface
PART CODE SDMX4-8192-A70
DETAILS www.sandisk.com
FULL REVIEW Nov 2007



ALBA PRDAB210MP3

★★★★★

£47 inc VAT

From www.laskys.com


Alba's affordable 1GB MP3 player can be powered for over 25 hours by a single

AA battery. The PRDAB210MP3 is less style-conscious than many players, but it makes up for this with its sound quality and range of functions. It incorporates a digital DAB radio, and both radio and MP3 playback were loud, clear and distinct. The menu system is surprisingly sophisticated for such a simple device. A three-line LCD screen can display tracks in several ways, including by artist and the date they were transferred to the player. You can even choose whether the device connects to your computer as an MTP or a simple USB mass storage device.

MP3 PLAYER 1GB capacity, supports MP3, WMA, WMA-DRM, DAB radio, USB Hi-Speed interface
PART CODE PRDAB210MP3
DETAILS www.laskys.com
FULL REVIEW Nov 2007



AUDIOENGINE A2

★★★★★

£110 inc VAT

From www.ecodigital.co.uk

Audioengine's A2 speakers look expensive, with gold-plated connectors and high-gloss wooden cabinets. The individual components even come packed in separate drawstring bags, while the tweeters and woofers are made out of silk and Kevlar respectively.

The cabinets are designed to fit comfortably on your desk, with the footprint of a DVD case. The bare ends of the speaker wires are connected with gold-plated thumbscrews on the back of each cabinet, while the left speaker bears a 3.5mm stereo mini-jack

socket and twin RCA inputs, along with the volume knob.

Bass tones are extraordinarily powerful. We found that we had to turn down the bass using the equalizer of our audio source to get a balanced sound and prevent it overwhelming the midrange. Once the adjustments were made, notes in the midrange were as well defined as the detailed bass and treble sound. The A2 is surprisingly loud for such a small set, and the general quality of the sound is rich, warm and vibrant.

These speakers are in a different class to standard PC speakers such as the Hercules XPS 2.1 Lounge (reviewed below), and their price reflects that. They look and sound expensive. As long as you're prepared to tweak equaliser settings to get a perfectly balanced sound, the result is well worth the price.

Kat Orphanides



SUMMARY

- ☒ Look and sound fantastic
- ☒ Great power and volume
- ☒ Expensive

SPEAKERS 2.0 configuration, 30W power, 3.5mm stereo input, RCA inputs
DETAILS www.audioengineusa.com

HERCULES XPS 2.1 Lounge

★★★★★

£40 inc VAT

From www.amazon.co.uk

Hercules' XPS 2.1 Lounge is an affordable speaker set with unobtrusive looks and clean, high-quality sound. The curved treble satellites and solid rectangular bass subwoofer are fairly attractive. They're unlikely to win any design awards, but they wouldn't look out of place in your sitting room.

Volume and bass controls are on a separate unit, which also has microphone and headphone sockets. There's also a 3.5mm stereo jack cable, which can be plugged into the headphone socket of any MP3 player, and a cradle to hold your player in place. A button on the side of the unit allows you to

switch between audio from your PC and the auxiliary source. The speakers sounded clear and detailed, with plenty of volume, while bass tones were rich and powerful. Audio output was well balanced between the speakers, while surround and 3D effects gave a surprisingly convincing impression of depth.

The XPS 2.1 Lounge sounds great for the money. Our only complaint was that the remote control unit left messy cabling on our desk. It's a minor gripe, though, and these speakers are good value.

Kat Orphanides



SUMMARY

- ☒ Good value
- ☒ Excellent sound quality
- ☒ Too many unsightly cables

STEREO 2.1 SPEAKERS 32W RMS power, 3.5mm stereo inputs, 3.5mm microphone pass-through socket, 3.5mm male auxiliary input PART CODE 4768140
DETAILS www.hercules.com

LOGITECH X-230

★★★★★

£24 inc VAT

From www.amazon.co.uk

Logitech's X-230 speakers are among our all-time favourites, with a sound that's clearer, richer and more balanced than any other set under £50, and a few that are more expensive. The volume and bass controls are on the right satellite and subwoofer respectively, and all the cables except power protrude from the right satellite. If you want a good set for music or games then there are no better speakers available at this price.



STEREO SPEAKERS 2.1 configuration, 32W power, 3.5mm stereo cable inputs PART CODE 970123-1120
DETAILS www.logitech.com FULL REVIEW Jun 2007

APPLE iPod Nano

★★★★★

£129 inc VAT

From www.apple.com/uk

The latest version of Apple's iPod Nano combines great audio quality with a sharp 2in screen to create an outstanding multimedia player that's small enough to fit in the ticket pocket of a pair of jeans. It lasted over 30 hours in our audio battery test, and over five during video playback. Despite its mediocre headphones and its dependence on iTunes, the Nano exceeded our expectations with clear, rich sound at every setting and high-quality video rendition.



MP3 PLAYER 8GB capacity, supports MP3, Wav, AAC, Protected AAC, Audible, Apple Lossless and AIFF audio, JPEG images, H.264 and MPEG4 video (with limitations), USB Hi-Speed interface PART CODE MB257ZO/A
DETAILS www.apple.com/uk FULL REVIEW Dec 2007

IRHYTHMS A-211

★★★★★

£100 inc VAT

From www.scan.co.uk

2007 has been a busy year for iPod-docking speakers. They are ideal for enjoying your MP3 collection without having to switch on your PC. The compact designs most manufacturers favour aren't ideal for providing good sound quality, and the fee Apple charges for its Made for iPod certification means that most iPod-compatible speakers are poor value compared to standard PC speakers.

Irrhythms' A-211 set bucks this trend. The conventional subwoofer-based design provides much deeper bass and louder overall volumes than all-in-one designs, and it produces very high-quality sound, making it well suited for use with iPods and computers.

IPOD DOCK SPEAKERS 2.1 configuration, 133W RMS power, compatible with all docking iPods and first-generation Shuffle, auxiliary line input PART CODE LN16326 DETAILS www.irhythms.com FULL REVIEW Oct 2007

CREATIVE Zen

★★★★

£76 inc VAT
From www.ebuyer.com

Creative's 4GB Zen has a 2.5in screen and costs less than the equivalent iPod Nano with the same capacity and a smaller 2in screen. It can play audio in WMA, WMA-DRM, MP3, Wav and – for the first time – AAC formats, which is great news for iTunes fans. Unfortunately, it can't handle the protected AAC files bought from Apple's iTunes Store.

The Zen is dominated by its screen, with control buttons to the right. The menu system is easy to use, and it's simple to scroll through your music collection by track name or artist initial. There's a built-in microphone, FM radio and an SD card slot, which lets you add up to 4GB of extra capacity. This means you can use the player to view photos directly from many digital cameras or double the amount of music you play. The interface has some nice features, such as a selection of wallpaper and menu themes, cover artwork, customisable menu shortcuts and the ability to protect content with a password.

For a device with so much potential as a video player, its abilities are sadly lacking in this department. You can't make video playlists or watch all the videos in a folder in sequence. The Zen can play video files at a resolution of 320x240 in a variety of formats, including MJPEG, WMV9, MPEG4, XviD, DivX 4.x and DivX 5.x. However, as with many portable players, there are limitations to its support for these file types, particularly with the audio track format, and the Zen was unable to play any of our existing



collection of MPEG4 files. Video conversion software is included but is frustratingly slow, particularly at high quality.

Colours on the Zen's screen are accurate, and it's easy to view from most angles and under most conditions, although it isn't as bright or sharp as other players, such as the iPod Touch (see *What's New, Shopper* 238). Audio quality is clean, clear and well balanced, although it sounds a little bright at flat EQ settings. Its configuration menus include both a custom EQ mixer and a variety of effective presets. The headphones that come with the player leak sound and aren't that comfortable to wear, but the sound is relatively good quality.

The Zen's most serious problem is its battery life. A full charge lasted for only 10 hours and 10 minutes in our audio playback test. This isn't helped by the lack of a screen blanking feature, although it does switch off its backlight. The poor battery life is mitigated by a full recharge time of around an hour, but it's still annoying on long trips. Video playback was better, lasting three hours and 50 minutes in our test.

The Zen looks like a perfect miniature multimedia player. It's easy to use and sounds great, but its battery life, average screen and relatively poor video compatibility mean that it fails to live up to its potential.

Kat Orphanides

SUMMARY

- ✓ Attractive, simple interface
- ✓ Good audio quality
- ✗ Poor battery life

MP3 PLAYER 4GB capacity, supports MP3, Wav, WMA, WMA-DRM, AAC, JPEG images, MJPEG, WMV9, MPEG4, XviD, DivX 4.x and DivX 5.x, video, USB Hi-Speed interface
PART CODE: 70PF216200115
DETAILS: <http://uk.europe.creative.com>

PERFORMANCE (see page 66)



Better than MP3?

High-efficiency advanced audio coding, or HE-AAC, is the latest development of the AAC audio standard, which was designed to improve upon, and ultimately succeed, MP3. AAC was designed to sound better at low bit rates (such as 64Kbit/s) than MP3, and HE-AAC improves on that still further.

In extensive tests, users concluded that HE-AAC music files encoded at 64Kbit/s didn't match the quality of a 128Kbit/s MP3, but was almost as good. When compared with an MP3 at the same constant bit rate, HE-AAC more faithfully reproduces high notes and subtle shifts in tone. There are fewer differences if you compare files encoded at a variable bit rate, but HE-AAC is still perceptibly crisper.

AUDIO DEAR

HE-AAC excels at reproducing voices and music at 48Kbit/s. This makes it perfect for internet radio. The standard is already being used for Virgin Radio and AOL's streams, and has been adopted for the second generation of DAB radios, called DAB+. Existing DAB radios can't receive it, but most standalone internet radios should be firmware-upgradable to support HE-AAC. Just check the manufacturer's website to find out about your specific model.

HE-AAC has also been approved as part of the digital TV standard for use as the audio codec in MPEG4 video streams. It forms part of the specification for the DVB-H (handheld) broadcasting standard.

When it comes to portable audio players, few are compatible with HE-AAC – not even iPods. Some mobile phones, including recent models from Nokia, Samsung and Motorola, can play HE-AAC MP4 files, but there is currently no dedicated portable media player available that supports the standard.

HE-AAC software audio players include VLC, Winamp and Foobar2000 for Windows, and Songbird and FStream for Mac OS X. Confusingly, though, HE-AAC is variously known as aacPlus, aacPlus v2, AAC+, AAC+ Enhanced and EAAC+, although all adhere to the MPEG4 standard and are intercompatible.

If you want to create HE-AAC files, download the free Foobar2000 player (www.foobar2000.org), which includes a link to download Nero's free AAC encoder (the latest version is 1.1.34.2). The first time you ask the player to encode in AAC MP4 format, it'll ask you to specify the location of the Nero encoder. To encode in HE-AAC, you'll have to add -he to Foobar's parameters string as, by default, the Nero AAC Codec encodes music as normal AAC-LC MP4 files.

Also consider...

SHURE SE110

★★★★★

£50 inc VAT
From www.mymemory.co.uk

PRICE CUT!



Shure's SE110 earphones come with foam rubber sleeves that block out almost all ambient noise. This allows you to listen to music comfortably at low volumes, even in noisy environments such as on public transport. Treble and mid-range tones are crystal clear, while the bass is powerful and well defined. The cables and connectors are heavier than those of most earphones, and the foam sleeves feel strange at first. However, they provide an excellent listening experience, and a recent price cut makes them an affordable choice if you are after high-end earphones.

EARPHONES Two pairs foam sleeves, three pairs soft flex sleeves, 91cm cable
PART CODE SE110
DETAILS www.shure.co.uk
FULL REVIEW Dec 2007

SAMSUNG YP-T9

★★★★★

£70 inc VAT
From www.ebuyer.com



The main appeal of Samsung's beautifully designed YP-T9 is its astonishingly good audio quality. It produces clear, undistorted sound at even the highest volumes. It has a huge number of EQ and 3D presets, plus a nine-band custom EQ so you can tweak the sound to your heart's content. It can also play video on its 2in screen, and has a battery life of over 26 hours. It's the only player we've reviewed to support Bluetooth, so you can wirelessly stream music to headphones and speakers that support the standard.

MP3 PLAYER 2GB capacity, supports MP3, WMA, WMA-DRM, JPEG images, SVI video, USB Hi-Speed interface
PART CODE YP-T9JBQB
DETAILS www.samsung.co.uk
FULL REVIEW Nov 2007